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Alex S. Wilner

Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz

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**Violent Transformations:  
Can Adult Learning Theory Help Explain Radicalization, Political Violence, and  
Terrorism?**

Alex S. Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz

*Learning to be Violent?*

Adult education is imbued with positive thinking and subjective goals. Social, economic, and political emancipation and value-based shifts in attitudes are its theoretical and practical cornerstones. This is particularly evident in Stephen Brookfield and John Holst's *Radicalizing Learning* (Jossey-Bass, 2011). "For us," they write, "adult learning is inextricably tied to creating and extending political and economic democracy – to equalizing democratic control of and access to wealth, education, health care, and creative work, and to promoting collective ... forms of decision-making and labor" (xii). Adult education's "traditional concern" is to create "critical thinkers" able to counter any process of "brainwashing or ideological manipulation" (2). Thus the field's contemporary goals include the encouragement of "political and cultural democracy" and educating adults to learn "how to recognize and abolish privilege around race, gender, status, and identity ... [and] class" (4). And for *radical learning* in particular, the process involves the *technical* (i.e. learning how to "stand up to racist speech"), the *communicative* (i.e. "learning how to bring the reality of racism to another's consciousness"), and the *emancipatory* (i.e. "integrating an alertness to racism into one's daily reasons and practice") (16). Brookfield and Holst use Nelson Mandela's life to illustrate how their theory is put into practice:

One well-chronicled example that illustrates the approach to understanding adult learning we are talking about is the learning project Nelson Mandela undertook to raise an army and conduct a program of sabotage against the military installations of the South African apartheid regime. In his autobiography ... Mandela describes his life in terms that constantly require learning ... to question and change assumptions that had guided his life up to that point ... In the tradition of adult education that we are claiming as central to the field, Mandela's development of tactical skills, political insight, communicative competence, and technical knowledge – all geared toward the realization of democracy – is a quintessential example of adult learning. (21-2)

There is no question that the collapse of Apartheid was an entirely justified and morally pertinent development. South African democracy emancipated millions of individuals, strengthened global anti-racism norms, and became a beacon of hope the world over. What we can (and perhaps should) question, however, is whether adult learning moves in only one singular direction: towards the good, the moral, and the democratic. Brookfield and Holst regard adult learning "as irreducibly value-based." (42) But is this a theoretical certainty? Can theories of adult learning also help explain negative shifts in attitude and behaviour, like accepting supremacist beliefs, internalizing racism, and participating in terrorism? What does the "dark side" of learning look like? (Naughton & Schied, 2010). What if an adult learner truly believes that his newly acquired ideology, violent as it may be, is personally emancipating? Is this not a form of learning; has he not also gone through a transformative process?

### *Transformative Radicalization*

Over the past decade, a preponderance of Islamist terrorism carried out in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia has involved Westerners inspired by militant Islamist ideologies. In a vast majority of cases, citizens, nationals, and residents of the countries targeted with violence are involved in preparing attacks.<sup>4</sup> In all cases, Western Islamist terrorists went through a process of radicalization. Radicalization is both a cognitive and emotional process that prepares and motivates an individual to pursue violent behaviour. It is a personal (and at times, interpersonal and social) process in which individuals adopt extreme political, social, and/or religious ideals and aspirations, and in which the attainment of particular goals justifies the use of indiscriminate violence. Current studies of radicalization are primarily oriented toward identifying the structural characteristics of the phenomenon (the phases that lead to violent behaviour), mapping the characteristics of terrorists (the profiles of radicalized individuals), and/or explaining the importance of in-group socialization to terrorist formation (the social reinforcement of ideas, roles, and attitudes) (Sageman 2004; Bakker 2006; Precht 2008; McCauley & Moskalkenko 2008; Coolsaet 2008; Horgan 2009). What these studies do not explore is the *transformation of meaning perspective* – the individual’s psycho-cognitive construction of new definitions of self – that is necessarily associated with radicalization and changes in behaviour. As John Horgan asserts, “terrorists do not just appear ‘fully fledged’ ... they have to learn and be trained, make sense of what they learn and express that learning in various ways” (2009; 145). While radicalizing individuals and terrorist recruits may engage in “technical learning” (obtaining the skills required to participate in violent activity) what is most pertinent to understanding radicalization is the individual’s engagement in “ideological learning” (internalizing the rationales that legitimize violent behaviour). Few studies investigate the second of these two learning processes.

Theories of adult learning hold that individuals participate in the construction of personal knowledge and that learning is an interactive process of interpretation, integration, and transformation of experiences. Jack Mezirow defines learning as a “process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (1991; 12). Mezirow has insisted that the capacity to reflect critically on assumptions is the major difference between learning in childhood and learning in adulthood. Critical reflection involves examining the content of a situation, looking at the process of problem solving, and questioning the premise underlying the situation. An individual’s personal change is a product of cognitive and emotional processes of transformation. Proponents of adult learning theory understand that adults can experience significant events in their lives that can lead to a process of learning that involves a transformation that challenges or changes pre-existing values, beliefs and behaviors. Transformative learning (TL) is one adult learning theory that offers a conceptual framework for understanding how personal change is manifested in the adult learner. Though TL theory is rooted to and derives much of its genesis from education theory, it has an inherent ability to help explain much broader aspects of social and human behavior (Dubouloz, *et al.*, 2010).

We argue that transformative learning theory offers a unique conceptual starting point for building a framework for studying radicalization that is able to accommodate insight derived from other fields of research (Wilner & Dubouloz, 2010; 2011). Individuals who radicalize and

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<sup>4</sup> Terrorism is the use of indiscriminate violence against non-combatants by non-state actors with the purpose of generating fear in order to advance sociopolitical objectives.

contemplate killing others in campaigns of political violence do so because they come to believe that murder for a cause is feasible and just. Elementally, radicalization is a process of incremental change to an individual's personal belief system and involves internalizing a particular set of ideas. From a TL perspective, the precursors of radicalization, whether socio-political alienation, anger over foreign policy, or increasing religiosity, are better understood as factors that shape an individual's personal context of living. Crisis events and dilemmas lead to critical reflection and a reassessment of one's current life, future ambitions, and personal relationships that can restructure an individual's meaning perspective.

It is within these evolving contexts of living that the reception of information can instigate a process of identity deconstruction and reconstruction inherent to radicalization. With Islamist radicalization in particular, information rooted to religious ideals, duties, and practices are of particular importance. As radicalizing individuals critically examine their western identities and begin shaping new meaning perspectives, religion provides a lens with which to focus their energies. Images of conflict that purport to show injustices carried out against co-religionists are then internalized. From the context of TL theory, these images strengthen the disorienting dilemma and contradict previously-accepted knowledge upon which self-identification and behavior had been constructed. What results is a feeling of self-doubt, confusion over identity, and intense personal debate. Eventually a tipping point is reached whereby the radicalizing individual comes to realize that the old reality simply no longer makes sense and a new one must be established. This realization facilitates a process of critical reflection and encourages an exploration of a new self-reality by exploring identities and roles. In turn, new roles lead to the strengthening of the individual's new frame of reference. And by socializing with like-minded individuals (other radicals), these new identities, beliefs, and values are strengthened. The radicalizing individual eventually pursues their life on the basis of their new worldview such that certain behaviors (including violent behavior) are a product of the individual's transformed frame of reference.

### *Preliminary Findings*

Recently we applied *transformative radicalization* to a case study, providing a preliminary "plausibility probe" of our theoretical model (Wilner & Dubouloz, 2011). We used Ed Husain's personal account of radicalization, retold in his autobiography *The Islamist* (Penguin, 2007), to assess the indicators, characteristics, and pathways identified in transformative radicalization. In his book, Husain recounts his introduction to Islamism in London as a young man, his subsequent radicalization, his participation in Islamist activities, and his eventual renouncement of violent attitudes. The book contrasts Husain's upbringing in a middle income, mainstream British-Muslim household with his motivation, as a young adult, to later join and lead the British Islamist movement. His radicalization, recruitment, and indoctrination offer a starting point for probing transformative radicalization.

Husain's radicalization process took two steps: First, he went from accepting Islam as a personal religion to accepting Islam as a socio-political guide for South Asia (to be implemented by a variety of means, including non-violent ones); and second, he went from accepting political Islam along limited geographic lines to accepting political Islam as a guide for a global Islamic state (to be implemented by violent means only). In both cases Husain went through a learning process that involved a shift in meaning perspective and changes in behavior. His original boyhood beliefs and values were affected by new information (provided by religious books,

private tutelage, and social interactions), transplanted by new values (superiority, religiosity, political violence), and strengthened by in-group socialization (participation in the Islamist movement). Husain's new meaning perspectives formed the core of his new identity and resulted in novel behavior, like seeking political power as an Islamist activist, facilitating Islamist conferences, campaigning for greater piety among Muslims, denigrating non-politicized Muslims, vilifying Jews, Hindus, and homosexuals, working towards the establishment of the Islamic state, and facilitating violence.

Husain's radicalization was a gradual process; no singular trigger is apparent. Instead, he experiences several key episodes – or cumulative triggers – over a period of years that slowly distort the structure of his assumptions and expectations. With each episode, Husain faces a dilemma pertaining to his identity, the roles of religion in life and politics, and his social relationships. Gradually he seeks new ways of interpreting these dilemmas and, using Islamist insight, regains a sense of self-direction and coherence. Reinterpreting the meaning of his different points of view, Husain successfully transforms his meaning perspectives. The results are new religious, social, and political attitudes infused with Islamist beliefs. His religious values are fundamentally restructured: “spiritual Islam” (religion as a behavioral guide) is replaced with “political Islam” (religion as a set of rules for structuring society). His social values of equality, inclusiveness, and fairness give way to a rabid exclusivity that pits “good” Muslims (Islamists) against “bad” Muslims (non-Islamists) and non-Muslims (so-called *kafir*, or unbelievers). And his political meaning perspectives shift, whereby he seeks to establish a transnational Islamic state (the Caliphate) and replace capitalism and democracy with Islamic governance outlined by Shariah law. Having accepted his new meaning perspectives, Husain explores new roles and actions. This leads to new behavior in which he rejects his non-politicized Islamist identity, endorses strict piety among co-religionists, rebuffs British society, politics, and culture, becomes an active member of various radical groups, and accepts the utility of violence for establishing the Caliphate.

### *Conclusion*

Adult Education, and in particular transformative learning theory, offers us a unique way to think about the cognitive and behavioral changes that take place during the radicalization process. We suggest that borrowing and applying insight from TL theory opens new doors for exploring radicalization at the psycho-cognitive level. Importantly, nobody has done this sort of application before, and to date, our research has been well received by our peers in political science, International Relations, and security studies.

From the point of view of Adult Education, further discussion is needed on several fronts, and especially on the issue of *negative* transformations. Our subject – violent radicalization – would usually be thought of as a negative transformation and sits at the opposite spectrum from Brookfield and Holst's work. This is, of course, a subjective assumption based on a Western reference that favors the socio-political, liberal, and democratic status quo. Husain, for instance, did not interpret his changing worldview and behavior as anything but blissfully positive. He was, quite literally, doing God's work, and understood his radicalization and the promotion of an Islamist agenda as an intuitively good thing. And yet, the spread of violent exclusivist ideologies and anti-democratic norms are nonetheless interpreted by a vast majority of others, as harmful. If we agree, then the transformations we explore are antithesis to the transformations explored in the context of adult learning theories. In one sense, transformative radicalization flips Adult

Learning's normative and paradigmatic basis around and uses TL theory to explain a phenomenon that leads to harmful ends. But even if one is to take a neutral position on radicalization (i.e. it is neither good nor bad, but simply a process of learning), that in itself would also represent a marked difference from traditional adult learning approaches which are overwhelmingly applied in adult education to inherently positive shifts. This difference in outlook needs to be further explored. What are the consequences of approaching learning and transformations from a neutral or negative position? Theoretically speaking, do all perspective transformations share a common set of inherent principles that can be equally explored by Adult Learning theory? Therein, can TL theory help explain the universe of transformative cases (good, bad, or neutral)? If not ... why not?

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